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Correspondent Sam Jaffe and the web of uncertainty that entangled him

They left Sam Jaffe's ashes this week among the heroes at Arlington National Cemetery. I am not sure whether it was final vindication, or ultimate irony.

Sam was an ABC News correspondent in many places, including Moscow in the early Sixties. Somehow he got entangled in a web of gossip and innuendo that linked him at one time with the FBI, and then with the KGB. He spent the last years of his life trying to free himself from that web.

In 1983, as his cancer spread, he won a federal court ruling that cleared him of allegations that he had spied for the Soviet Union. Before that, the CIA had written him a letter admitting that the agency's own investigation proved he was a loyal American. Thus he died with his public record clear. But an infinity of questions has never been answered — about him and his accusers, whoever they were.

In a shoebox of yellowing snapshots from the early Sixties, I have some taken on the Black Sea beach at Mamaia, Rumania, when a flock of us Moscow correspondents were following Nikita Khrushchev on one of his trips to what were then called satellite countries.

There is Sam, sprawled on a hotel towel, mustached, red-faced, his body white against the sand — chain-smoking and laughing, as he often did. Later on that trip, as at every diplomatic reception in Moscow, Sam would push through the knot of correspondents who edged toward Mr. Khrushchev. "Nikita Sergeyevich!" he would shout, as if he and the Soviet premier were bosom pals.

The assumption among us then was that Sam's ambition was to get an exclusive interview with Mr. Khrushchev, and that caused him to act that way. Some called it gauche. But when Mr. Khrushchev finally was ousted, Sam was among the first to break the story.

He and I were not close: The little band of Western reporters in Moscow worked in two competing combines, and I was in the other

one. Competitive resentment of Sam's occasional success and his unctuous manner toward Soviet officials may have inspired some of the talk that went around even then about his being suspiciously close to the Russians.

I saw him later, in Hong Kong, Vietnam and Washington. But I did not realize that something more serious lay behind that gossip until I read that Sam himself had gone public in his fight against it.

Sam maintained that his career was shattered by allegations that he was an undercover intelligence agent.

He started work with the old International News Service, then was a marine combat correspondent in Korea. From 1955 to 1961, he covered the United Nations for CBS. That network sent him to Moscow to cover the trial of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers in 1960, and he was booked into the same hotel as Mrs. Powers, which gave him entree other reporters did not have.

The following year, he went to Moscow for ABC, and stayed till 1965. He was thrown out by the Russians after ABC broadcast a report that another Kremlin shakeup was imminent. Assigned to Vietnam, he won an Overseas Press Club award for his coverage.

But like the rest of his work, his performance in Vietnam stirred controversy. Some of his ex-colleagues spoke at his funeral, and praised him. Some who did not attend are

much less generous. They call him "flake" and worse. They say his work was unsatisfactory, and that is why he was fired. Sam asserted that he was let go because of CIA pressure after a Soviet defector falsely identified him as a one-time agent.

After that he worked here and there, but never held a big-league journalistic job again. He devoted most of his time to freedom-of-information suits and court efforts to clear his name.

In 1976, he told a congressional committee that while he was with CBS he had reported to the FBI on Soviet delegates at the U.N. He denied taking any money from the FBI, and said he never worked for the CIA or any foreign agency. But it was much harder to get the government to say so.

He demanded to know the specifics of whatever the government had against him. None of those specifics ever came out. But eventually the CIA did give him the letter saying it had no case against him.

And then U.S. District Judge Barrington D. Parker issued an opinion saying the FBI had no grounds to question his patriotism, that all the derogatory material against him in the files, either came from discredited sources or was gossip or innuendo.

That is where it stood when he died of lung cancer last week.

A series of his friends delivered eulogies at the Fort Myer chapel, across the river in

Arlington. One recalled that "he witnessed many of mankind's woes, and was beset by more than a few of them himself." As a reporter, he said, Sam "regarded gunfire as a minor impediment to getting the facts."

They remembered his outgoing style, his cavorting in a native dance at Moscow's Uzbekistan restaurant, his historic bachelor's party at the Aragvi restaurant there. One said that at times, his journalistic eagerness made him his own worst enemy. His son said that "if he couldn't get in the front door, he'd go in the back."

And either directly or obliquely, every speaker referred to the web that had enmeshed Sam. An old sidekick said he "battled dragons" few of us ever encounter. His son said "I can tell you personally my father was no spy, because he couldn't keep a secret more than 15 or 20 minutes."

Ted Koppel, an ABC colleague, said "there was no ambiguity about the essence of this man. ... There aren't many of us who have had our loyalty certified by the CIA and our patriotism by a federal judge."

What a waste it was that Sam had to spend his last years defending his name, he went on — and what a shame that so many of his erstwhile friends did not speak out on his behalf. Sam's family can be proud now, he said — but "I'm not so sure about the rest of us."

Neither am I. It was hard to be sure of anything about Sam.

U.S.A.



— ERNEST B. FURGURSON
CHIEF OF THE SUN'S WASHINGTON BUREAU

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OBITUARIES

Sam Jaffe, 55, Former Broadcast Journalist

By J.Y. Smith
Washington Post Staff Writer

Sam Jaffe, 55, a former Moscow and Hong Kong bureau chief for ABC News who won a court ruling last year clearing him of allegations that he had spied for the Soviet Union, died of cancer Feb. 8 at his home in Bethesda.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Mr. Jaffe had a brilliant run as a newspaper and broadcast journalist. His assignments took him from New York to Siberia to the jungles of Southeast Asia and they gained him a standing enjoyed by few in his profession.

As it turned out, those promising times were an incongruous prelude to the shadows that followed him afterwards. For most of the past 15 years Mr. Jaffe had engaged in a tenacious and ultimately successful effort to clear his name of insubstantial but persistent suggestions by the FBI and the CIA that he was a foreign agent. The origin of these claims—many of which are still classified "secret"—has never been entirely explained.

"The last nine years have been incredible," Mr. Jaffe said in an interview with The Washington Post in 1979. "If it weren't for a few friends, I would be broken . . . I say I am not a Russian spy. The FBI says, 'Yeah, you are.' Well, I want them to prove it. I want it all out in the open. I want my family cleared. If I should drop dead, I don't want them living with this stigma. The CIA has cleared me. Now I want the FBI to do the same."

Earlier, Mr. Jaffe's relations with the FBI had been cordial. In 1976 he disclosed that for several years beginning in the 1950s he had reported to the agency on his Russian contacts.

Mr. Jaffe never was formally charged with espionage. But he contended that U.S. intelligence agencies had conspired to deprive him of his livelihood on the ground that he was a security risk. With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, he sought relief in the courts under the Freedom of Information Act.

Last year, U.S. District Judge Barrington D. Parker issued an opinion saying that the FBI had no grounds for questioning Mr. Jaffe's patriotism. In the late 1970s, the CIA said in a letter to Mr. Jaffe that its own investigation had shown him to be a loyal citizen.

The years of dull effort that it took to reach this result were in stark contrast to Mr. Jaffe's earlier career. A man who was as cheerful and disarming as he was resourceful and aggressive, he had a happy talent for being in the right place at the right time.

In 1955, as a freelancer, he covered a conference of Third World countries at Bandung, Indonesia, and interviewed the late Premier Chou En-lai of China. As a correspondent for CBS from 1955 to 1961, he covered the United Nations and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev's visit to this country in 1959.

In 1960, he went to Moscow for CBS to cover the trial of Francis Gary Powers, the pilot of the U-2 spy plane that was shot down over the Soviet Union in May of that year. The incident led to the cancellation of a summit meeting between Khrushchev and President Dwight D. Eisenhower and was one of the most publicized incidents of the Cold War.

Mr. Jaffe was the only western newsman covering the trial who was permitted by Soviet authorities to sit on the same level of the courtroom as Powers. He also was quartered in the same hotel as Powers' wife, who went to Moscow for the proceedings. In the Moscow context, these circumstances gave Mr. Jaffe a slight but nonetheless important advantage over his competitors.

In 1961, Mr. Jaffe joined ABC and went to Moscow to open its first bureau there. He covered the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the signing of the atmospheric nuclear test ban treaty, and the thaw in the Cold War. He was among the first—some said he was the very first—to report the ouster of Khrushchev from politics on the night of Oct. 14-15, 1964.

In 1965, he was expelled from the Soviet capital because of a report ABC carried from Washington saying that another shake-up in the Soviet leadership was imminent.

By then, Mr. Jaffe already had been assigned to take over ABC's Hong Kong Bureau. As the war in Vietnam deepened, he was sent there and for his coverage he won a prize from the Overseas Press Club. In 1968, he was reassigned to the United States and moved to Washington. The following year he resigned from ABC.

In 1972 and again in 1974, he made trips to China as a freelance correspondent for United Press International and the Chicago Tribune. He had a weekly talk show

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SAM JAFFE

on WRC Radio in the late 1970s. Unable to find regular work in the news business in recent years, he had assisted his wife in her flower business.

Samuel Adason Jaffe was born in San Francisco. He served in the Merchant Marine in World War II and then the Navy Reserves. He was a Marine combat correspondent in Korea during the war there. He attended the University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University and the New School for Social Research.

He worked for the old International News Service in San Francisco. He worked briefly for the U.N. in the early 1950s and then joined Life Magazine, where he was a reporter from 1952 to 1955.

Mr. Jaffe, who lived in Bethesda, was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Overseas Writers, the White House and State Department correspondents associations, and the Marine Corps Combat Correspondents Association.

His marriage to the former Josephine Winters ended in divorce.

Survivors include his wife, Jeune, and their two daughters, Deborah and Leah, all of Bethesda, and two children by his first marriage, Linda Franklin of Katonah, N.Y., and David Jaffe of New York City.